

NORTHCOM Chief Says U.S. Better Prepared Against Terror

Press Release

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 2, 2003 — "The United States is better prepared to face terrorist threats today and the U.S. Northern Command will continue to improve U.S. capabilities," the head of that unified command said today.

During an interview in the Pentagon, Air Force Gen. Ralph Eberhart said Northern Command brings a focus on planning and training to the homeland defense mission that was missing before.

The command stood up Oct. 1, 2002. It was declared "fully operational" Oct. 1, 2003. The command, based in Colorado Springs, Colo., is responsible for the U.S. military's homeland defense mission. NORTHCOM has the responsibility to plan, coordinate, exercise command and control of, and supervise the execution of federal military responses to external threats and aggression.

This also applies to emergency and extraordinary domestic circumstances where the secretary of defense has approved military support.

"Before, it was one of many missions for other commands," Eberhart said. "Today that's all we do. It's Job #1. That allows us to establish relationships. It allows us to focus on planning. It allows us to go out and exercise and train so that we're better prepared to provide for the homeland defense and assist others as they provide vital security."

The command's credo is to deter, prevent, defeat. Eberhart said the key is to have actionable intelligence. This is information that allows U.S. authorities to get at the "front end" of the problem "so that we can deter, prevent, defeat so that we're not just mitigating -- cleaning up," he said. "We want that actionable intelligence that allows us to go out and meet the enemy face-to-face so we're not surprised by that asymmetric threat."

U.S. officials could then secure the port or ship, or stop the aircraft from taking on a terrorist mission. "So we want to get on the front end of the problem with actionable intelligence," he said.

Eberhart said the biggest challenge facing the command is the unknown. "What is the terrorists' plan? What form, where, when will the next attack come from?"

He said the good news is that the various agencies involved in collecting this information are now sharing it properly.

"There are no secrets in terms of one part of government

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not telling another part of the government something that might be important in terms of safeguarding America," he said.

But, the general said, it is what he doesn't know that bothers him. "What one individual or a small cell might be trying, that's the thing that worries me most and the one impediment to us being successful," he said.

Northern Command cooperates with the other unified commands and shares intelligence with them. "In our view, all terrorists are not equal," he said. "We're very interested in the terrorists that have designs on the ... United States. Those are the ones at the top of our list, and those are the ones we encourage Central Command, Special Operations Command and other commands to place the most emphasis on."

The command also wants to ensure that working relationships are forged among all agencies involved in homeland defense, Eberhart said. These are relationships cut across federal, state and local agencies, and include players from law-enforcement, emergency services, intelligence agencies and the military.

He said the relationships go right to the local level — to the police and firefighters who would be the first to confront an act of terror. "We believe those relationships will be key to our success," he said.

To foster those relationships, Northern Command has sponsored almost 20 exercises, from tabletop types to a robust one conducted in August.

"We have a long invitation list that includes anyone who might have an interest or play a role," he said. The list includes governmental agencies as well as nongovernmental groups such as the Red Cross or the Association of American Railroads.

"We try to be inclusive," he said. Eberhart said one phrase often used at the command is "we don't want to be exchanging business cards at the scene of the incident."

"We want to already know each other," he said. "We want to have already worked together, we want to have confidence in each other, we want to have trust in each other. It would also be a good idea if we were friends too."

But the command is a military organization. It is part of the Defense Department and takes orders just as any other unified command does. The command does not take direction from the Homeland Security Department.

"We, first and foremost, are a U.S. unified command and our title is Northern Command — not Homeland Defense Command, not Homeland Security Command," Eberhart said. "All those

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things that apply to the other (military) commands out there apply to us.

"What's different ... is that our homeland is in our area of responsibility," he continued. "The crown jewels are in our area of responsibility. Therefore, we will have some civil support, some homeland security type missions that other commands might not have."